

# "Ornamentation and Improvisation in Mozart." By Frederick Neumann.

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## Review of a Book

Frederick Neumann: *Ornamentation and Improvisation in Mozart*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. xiv, 301p. ISBN 0-691-09130-7

"Here is now a rule without an exception: the appoggiatura is never separated from its main note, but is taken at all times in the same stroke."<sup>1</sup> In the fascinating, ever-controversial subject of post-1750 ornamentation, such an ironclad rule is rare indeed, as Frederick Neumann forcefully demonstrates throughout his thought-provoking *Ornamentation and Improvisation in Mozart*, a treatise dedicated to Mozart as a "modest token of gratitude."

A sequel to the author's earlier *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music: with Special Emphasis on J.S. Bach* (Princeton, 1978), the present volume extends Neumann's ongoing inquiry into historically-appropriate performance practices. Part I, "The Ornaments," consists of eleven chapters devoted to the *Vorschlag* (appoggiatura, grace note), slide, trill, turn, and arpeggio. Rather than the rigorous execution dictated by abstract ornament tables, Neumann consistently advocates flexibility. In the eight chapters of Part II, "Improvisations" [*sic*], he addresses the problem of pitches that the performer was expected to add to Mozart's text, from single notes to cadenzas. In what situations are such additions necessary, optional, or improper? How might they be designed?

Immediately, Neumann challenges the two restrictive rules long held by many scholars: "all ornaments start on the beat, and trills have to start with the upper note" (p. 3). Consistent with his earlier writings, he stresses the need to balance a wide spectrum of treatises, which mirror diversified practices, with musical evidence, both external (here, Mozart's autograph notation) and internal (Mozart's letters, with taste as final arbiter in matters of execution). Neumann then announces his intention, in Part I, to "suggest solutions on a scale that ranges from near

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1. Leopold Mozart, *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*, trans. Editha Knecker, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 166.

certainty to wider options, where alternatives of roughly equal merit are available." (p. 5).

Part I commences in earnest with a consideration of the *Vorschlag*, "a generic term for any single ornamental pitch that precedes its principal note, is slurred to it, and in vocal music, shares with it the same syllable" (p. 6). Chapter 2, "The Vocal Appoggiatura," contains a startling conclusion concerning the long species: the "overlong" rules (and several others) espoused by the theorists, including Mozart's father, "applied to Mozart not at all or at best only in marginal cases" (p. 21). Similar investigation of the instrumental appoggiatura in Chapter 3 leads to firm conclusions for the long species, a more tentative proposition for the short species. In the lengthy Chapter 4 the grace note, emancipated from "the grip of the downbeat dogma," is considered by category, such as *Vorschläge* before written out appoggiaturas, triplets, etc. For Neumann, the inescapable conclusion is that in Mozart's vocal works, "the grace note played an occasional role and that in his instrumental music it played a very large one" (p. 75). Examined in Chapter 5 are ambiguous and special cases, such as *tierces coulées* (as in the celebrated Piano Rondo in D Major, K. 485), in which the choice between grace notes and appoggiaturas is less clear.

Concise chapters on the *Zwischenschlag* and slide serve as an interlude before chapters on the trill in theory—the eighteenth-century trill decidedly was not restricted to the upper-note start—and practice. Neumann reiterates for Mozart a suggestion made earlier for Bach: leave out the trill and judge whether a short appoggiatura, a long appoggiatura, or a grace note would be a desirable addition to the bare melody; "if so, the corresponding trill type is likely to be the proper or at least an acceptable choice. Where none of these ornaments seems to fit, the main-note trill is indicated" (p. 114). He then proceeds to explore the appoggiatura trill, the main-note trill (at least sixteen situations favor it), the *Schneller*, the grace-note trill, and the compound trill. Chapters on the turn and the arpeggio conclude Part I.

Like Part I, Part II opens with an introduction. For Neumann, the term "improvisation" designates "any pitches sung or played that were not written in the score, whether done in impromptu spontaneity or prepared in advance" (p. 179). The improvisations range from single pitches or other small ornaments (turns, for example) to larger additions: the florid elaboration of a written melody; the filling in of empty spaces with transitional passages (brief embellishment, *Eingang*, *cadenza*). Moderation is the watchword.

Neumann first examines the *appoggiatura* in recitative, seeking to provide approximate guidelines for identifying the three categories of the obligatory, the optional, and the undesirable. Because the *appoggiatura* in closed numbers is so frequently spelled out (Chapter 13), additional improvised *appoggiaturas* must be inserted with caution, chiefly "where a feeling of warmth, longing, tenderness, or similar emotions will spontaneously summon them, or where in songful passages the logic of melodic continuity suggests their insertion" (pp. 214-15). Vocal cadenzas (Chapter 14) have two distinct functions: to extend a phrase ending that is followed by a rest; to connect phrases. Two problems confront the performer: how to embellish (observe the one-breath principle) and when. More troublesome is the matter of improvising ornaments in arias. Mozart himself opposed excessive embellishment by performers. Diminutions, in Neumann's view, "should be strongly discouraged for all operas starting with *Idomeneo*, and all arias after approximately 1780" (p. 239).

In Chapter 16, the author explores the special case of the piano concertos, focusing on the areas of skeletal passages that require completion and passages self-sufficient as written which might be elaborated in performance. Instrumental cadenzas are the subject of Chapter 17 and *Eingänge*, their placement and design, the subject of Chapter 18. Embellishments in repeats — repeat marks, recapitulation, the da capo, and the rondo — are addressed in a brief closing chapter, Neumann concluding that "ornamental additions on certain repeats may be proper but are rarely required" (p. 281).

The author possesses an enviable command of his materials: the theorists, the autographs and first editions, the old and new Mozart editions, all are invoked with telling effect. His balance of instrumental and vocal music is laudable. So too is his constant relation of ornamentation and improvisation to other elements of performance practice, among them diction, dynamics, tempo, and articulation. Neumann's ability to capsule within chapters yields clear pictures of complex phenomena. In one concise paragraph, for example, he imparts essential information about cadenza length, thematic quotation and treatment, proportion of nonthematic material, and cadential trill (p. 259). On a larger scale, given the wealth of detail required to support his arguments, welcome summaries placed at chapter ends conveniently recall the main lines of discussion.

While observing due scholarly caution, Neumann does not shrink from taking stands. Thus, opposing any substitution for an original cadenza by



Mozart, he maintains, "where we have an original cadenza it should be considered 'sacrosanct' and not be replaced by a transplant that is bound to be inferior in invention, style and form" (p. 258). Moving from prose to music, the author frequently provides his own suggested realizations of ornament signs and passages that could accomodate improvisation. See, for example, his transitional embellishments for the Countess's "Dove sono" and end embellishment for Susanna's "Deh vieni" (p. 225). He then proceeds to offer alternatives to the embellishments supplied by Wolfgang Plath and Wolfgang Rehm for the NMA's *Don Giovanni*.

Elegantly printed and copiously illustrated with musical examples, like its predecessor, the present volume is a joy to read and use. Some awkward page turns intrude, as on pp. 87-88, where one must constantly flip back and forth in order to compare the complex argument on p. 87 with the examples printed on p. 88. Understandable though it is, Neumann's decision not to reprint documentation offered in his earlier volume requires the reader to have a copy at hand. Unavoidable in a tapestry of such richness and detail, some errors of spelling, Koechel listing, measure numbers, and musical notation have slipped by.

More broadly, some theorists emerge in a highly favorable light, while others, notably Türk, draw repeated critical fire. The elements of Mozart's cadenzas are covered admirably; their overall design is not.<sup>2</sup> Certain to arise, some questions are equally certain to elicit widely divergent responses. In his eagerness to combat the rigidity of the on-beat advocates, has Neumann tilted the balance too far in favor of pre-beat execution? Are his judgments of a passage's character, on which the potential execution of an ornament hangs, too subjective for the formulation of reliable directives for realization? Is there more room in Mozart's music, both vocal and instrumental, for tasteful improvised embellishment than Neumann is willing to accept, as in the Piano Sonata in B<sup>b</sup> Major, K. 570/II, for example [following the written-out precedent of the Rondos K. 494 and K. 511]? Is improvisation strictly the province of the soloist?<sup>3</sup> Can modern performers, with proper study and the necessary musicality, manage to improvise in an appropriate manner?

Chapter 10, "The Turn," graphically demonstrates Neumann's method of investigating a complex ornament. Within a logically organized, clearly

2. Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda, *Interpreting Mozart on the Keyboard*, trans. Leo Black (1962; reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1985), Chapter 11.

3. See, for example, John Spitzer and Neal Zaslaw, "Improvised Ornamentation in Eighteenth-Century Orchestras," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 39 (Fall 1986): 524-77.

apprehensible framework, the reader encounters a wealth of background information, a variety of recommended solutions applied to a refreshingly wide range of music, persuasive argument, personal opinion, and some polemic. Of paramount importance, ornamentation and improvisation are placed in context. Through thoroughness, musicianship, and imagination, Neumann has created a book that merits careful study. It joins other recent efforts that enrich our knowledge of Classic Period performance practice in general, notably Sandra P. Rosenblum's scintillating *Performance Practice in Classic Piano Music* (Indiana, 1988), and of Mozart performance in particular, especially Jean-Pierre Marty's *The Tempo Indications of Mozart* (Yale, 1988). It is instructive, for example, to compare Neumann's suggested tempo for the overture to *The Marriage of Figaro* (MM♩ = 120, p. 155, approached through the turns) with Marty's determination reached through his deciphering of Mozart's tempo "code" (♩ = 276). Further, Neumann's coverage of Mozart's practice hopefully will inspire a comparable study of Haydn's complex ornamentation.

By their very nature, the subjects of ornamentation and improvisation invite often-heated disagreement. Several of the author's contentions, interpretations, and realizations of individual examples have been challenged already and promise to provoke further debate.<sup>4</sup> Still, Frederick Neumann, professor emeritus of the University of Richmond, violinist, conductor, and scholar, deserves praise for a sensitive, comprehensive, and stimulating treatment of his subjects. Using the work of the Badura-Skodas and others as a point of departure, he has significantly extended the frontiers of knowledge. As intended, "The book tries to guide without issuing marching orders; in the end performers cannot escape the responsibility of their own artistic judgment" (p. 5).

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4. See the reviews by [Linda] Faye Ferguson, *Mozart-Jahrbuch* 1986 (Kassel, 1987), 243-49, and Robert D. Levin, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 41 (Summer 1988): 355-68.